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Reed - An Oration - 1844

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Charles Brown

"THE MODEL ADMINISTRATION."

AN

ORATION,

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

WHIG CITIZENS OF PHILADELPHIA,

ON

THE TWENTY-SECOND OF FEBRUARY, 1841.

BY WILLIAM B. REED.

PHILADELPHIA:
J. CRISSY, PRINTER, NO. 4 MINOR STREET.
1841.

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"RESOLVED, That the Whigs of Philadelphia will celebrate, in an appropriate manner, the approaching anniversary of the Birth of Washington; and that it be recommended to the Whigs of the Nation to unite in a simultaneous celebration throughout the land, so as to exhibit their veneration for a character which time and contrast make more venerable, and their fidelity to principles, which, as professed and practised by Washington, we and our Candidate are proud to call our own."

ORATION.

Fellow Citizens:

If you expect to hear from my lips a party speech, you will go hence disappointed. The day we have met to celebrate is one of the Nation's holy days, when every man, the ordinary political contests of the day sinking to repose, stands side by side with his American brother around the honored grave of the Father of his country, and meditates in reverence of his great example.

And yet the question has been asked; and the question must be answered, why, as a Party, we have here assembled. The simple reason is, that the principles of Washington are the principles of the Whigs. His policy of government, his theory of the constitution are ours, and while new theories, new anniversaries, new men, are the objects of admiration elsewhere, we are not ashamed to think or say that we know of no one who can share the superstitious reverence which our childhood learned and which our manhood is not too proud to practice. And now, when hope so long deferred, is dawning brightly on the people's mind, that years of misgovernment are nearly over, government administered on principles at variance from those which guided the administration of the first and greatest Presi-

dent, there is mingled a confident assurance that the candidate of the Whigs, towards whom the affections of the Nation are now directed with an intensity without a parallel, sympathising with us, will make Washington's administration the model of his own.

What then were Washington's conduct and administration, what his policy of government, what his view of the constitution? Will you have patience, my Whig friends, while I tell you? And if I succeed in the object I have in view, in bringing to your mind, as matter of conviction, and abiding political faith, that he and his friends, those illustrious men, whose counsel he received and yet scrutinized with the discrimination of his manly intellect, best understood and administered the government which they had created, and that even now, after the lapse of time and change of minor circumstances, we can have no better guides than they were, I shall have my exceeding great reward. I shall more than ever be proud of any agency I have had, however humble, in bearing testimony to our fidelity, the fidelity of the Whigs of Philadelphia, where the best part of Washington's public life was passed, to his principles, and reverence of his example.

It is now exactly seventy years since Washington as a public man first came to this city, to attend, as a Delegate from Virginia, the first Continental Congress. The building yet stands, appropriated to other and far humbler uses, where this great council, the Mother-Council of the Nation, met. Its history is part of our classic annals. Its purpose was deliberation, remonstrance, supplication. An appeal, firmly and affectionately made, in behalf of an injured people. But it was more than this. It revealed the truth that the American colonies, separated by habit, associations, religion, every thing but language

and common suffering, were fit to be one United Nation. And it was by the cradle of the Union that Washington was found.

Less than a year rolls by, and again the Council of the Nation has been convoked. The armed hand of the oppressor is on this people. Blood had been shed. There was a voice calling for vengeance from the earth; but it was the cry not of the brother's but of the child's blood, praying for vengeance on a cruel parent. Lexington and Concord, unknown and humble spots, had become immortal, and Colonial America sprang into existence, an armed and in fact an independent nation. Then, too, HE was here, and here in Philadelphia it was that Washington was taken from Virginia and given to America. It was here, almost within trumpet sound of this spot, that he was made Commander in Chief of the volunteer armies of the nation, and that the covenant was sealed which secured to us and to all future ages the inheritance of his fame.

Thus was Washington the first-born child of the social union. He was made the leader of America's armies, by a choice that was unanimous. Of the forty-eight individuals who cast their votes for Washington, forty had known him long and well—had known him in the first Congress where strangers looked on each other's faces for the first time, and formed their estimates of character by slow and deliberate judgment. He went to the camp at Cambridge, a stranger, to exercise new and unwonted authority, and to make the fearful experiment of subjecting a rude peasantry to the strict control of military discipline. And yet it was accomplished. And from every nook and corner of New England there went forth a voice of gratitude and praise to him, the *Southern* soldier, who had come from a distance to their rescue, who for their sake had left his hearth and family

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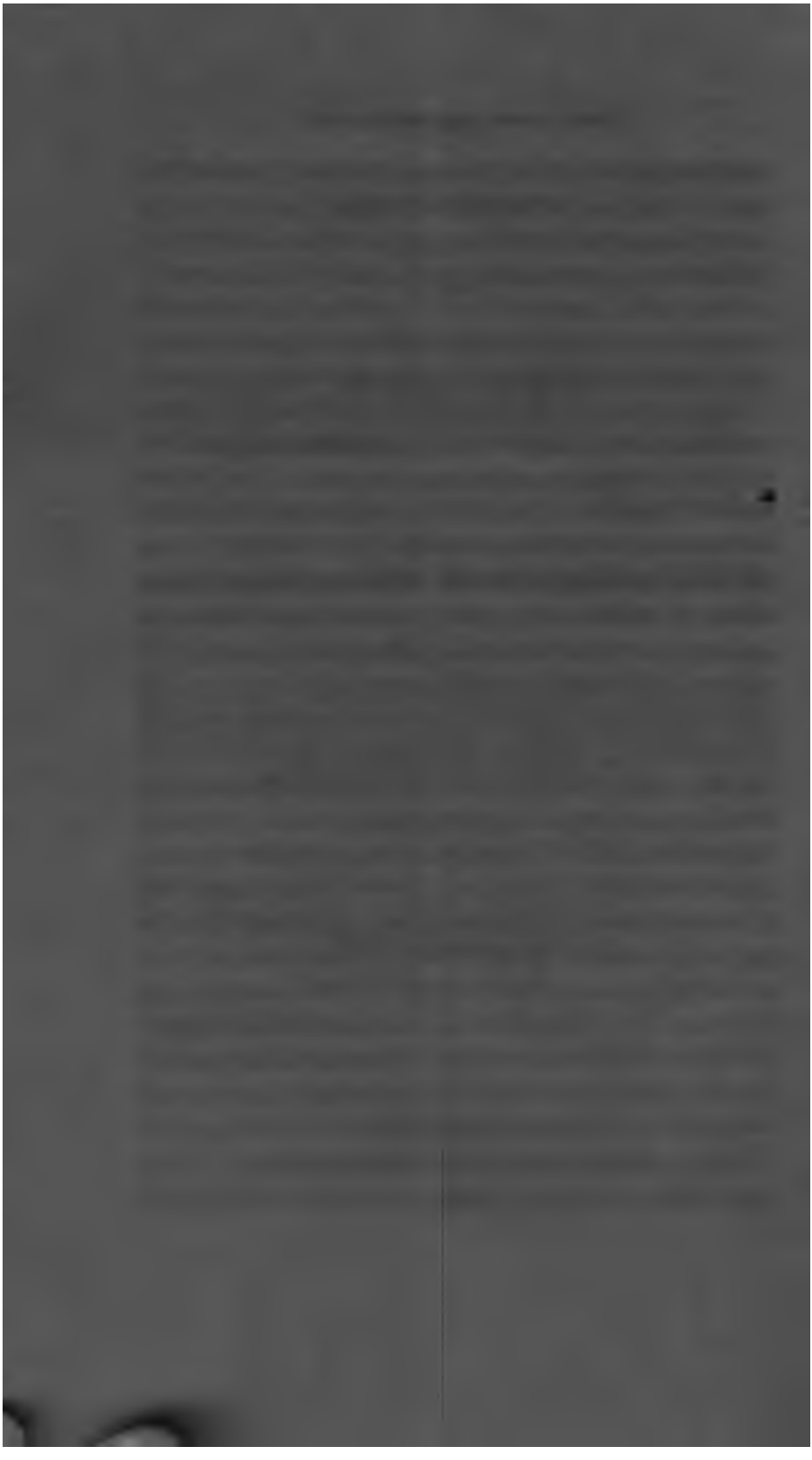

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Philadelphia, where war was declared, Independence proclaimed, and Washington commissioned, saw, with grateful joy, the meeting of a new and mightier conclave, which, with Washington for the leader of its peaceful counsels, was to secure the uncertain destinies of the country, and create the Union "now and forever, one and inseparable." Washington was President of the Convention which formed the Federal Constitution.

In his Journal he tells us that "Christ church bells were chimed when he entered the city." They, the ancient voices of our city's heart, rang out a peal of new welcome to him who now was coming as a man of peace on a peaceful ministry. On the next day the Convention met and after four months' secret session, gave to the world the Constitution under which we live. It was no ill-assorted fabric, hastily raised for temporary protection amidst the conflict of civil war, it was no Petition of Right thrust at the point of the sword on an unwilling master, it was no Solemn League and Covenant bearing the traces of the rugged feelings which gave it being, it was the result of mature and deliberate counsel whither each master mind brought the labors of meditation on the great truths of civil liberty, which were evolved from the history of the civilised world. It was a structure "built of stone ready made before it was brought thither, so that there was neither hammer, nor axe, nor any tool of iron heard in the house whilst it was building." And when it was complete, the modest diary of Washington tells us, that having received the papers from the Secretary of the Convention, he retired to "*meditate* on the momentous work that had been accomplished."

My friends and fellow citizens, you whose memories extend only over a peaceful retrospect, you who live in times of security and prosperity, whose slumbers have never been disturbed

by substantial fears for to-morrow, who only think of the Constitution as a subject of exhausted criticism, in and out of the councils of the Nation, come with me if you can, to the solitary chamber, where Washington is meditating. Fancy if you can, the thoughts, the hopes and fears, which under that calm exterior, were agitating his well balanced mind. He thought of it as a great Charter, which, if worth preserving, time and age would consecrate. He thought of it as a great instrument of practical beneficence to be interpreted in a spirit of generous benevolence. He did not study it as the sceptic studies the Bible to doubt and to cavil, and generally for his own poor purposes, as the phrase is, to *construe it strictly*. He knew what the people needed, and he best knew that they meant the Nations constitution to be no barren negation, no fruitless denial, but a creation of fair proportions and abundant practical efficacy, the fruit of that delegation of authority which it was hoped would return in generous bounty on the heads of those who gave it, and make this not only an united but a prosperous nation.

And when at the last call of the Nation thus created, Washington became its first Constitutional President, so he administered it; he made the country *feel* it had a Constitution worth all the blood of the Revolution, worth their love, worth their instinctive reverence.

And by whose agency did he administer the government? Who were the counsellors whom Washington called to his assistance? Hamilton and Knox, Jefferson and Randolph, the statesmen and soldiers whom the Revolution knew, the leader of the Revolution now selected. He chose them for their well-tried patriotism and merit, without a thought of personal aggrandizement or political advancement. He selected them for

the public service they could render. He did not huckster the high patronage of office. He did not invite competition of needy party rivals, ready for any sacrifice for the sake of place. He did not bestow the honors of the nation to the lowest bidder.* He was the victim of no irresponsible cabal, but the fellow counsellor with the wise and virtuous, the master of his own conscience, the resolute but modest guide of his own public conduct. No pestilent nepotism obscured his mental or his moral vision. No imbecile affection for family connexions perplexed his sober judgment. Had he not been childless he would still have been the Father of his country.

And his measures! They were conceived in the spirit of the widest beneficence, and have left in the Legislation of the country, traces which can never be effaced.

The great policy of protecting Domestic Industry had its origin with the Washington administration, and the Tariff system which is now made the subject of so much inconsiderate hostility, but which is interwoven with the affections of the American People, was sanctioned as constitutional and expedient by Washington himself. A protective Tariff was the second statute enacted by the Congress of 1789. The new light which bewilders contemporary statesmen, who see no authority in the Constitution for the exercise of this sacred right of self-defence, had not shone on his mind. He knew that in the deliberations

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* On 24th May 1791, Washington wrote as follows to Charles Cotesworth Pinckney and Edward Rutledge—"Gentlemen. An address to you jointly on a subject of the following nature, may have a singular appearance, but the singularity will not exceed the evidence which is thereby given of my opinion of and confidence in you, and of the opinion I entertain of your confidence and friendship for each other. A place in the Supreme Court of the Union remains to be filled. Will either of you two gentlemen accept it? And in that case which of you?"—In a joint reply Mr. Rutledge and Mr. Pinckney declined the appointment, and it was conferred on Thomas Johnson, of Maryland.

of the Convention a doubt of this had never been whispered, and approving "alike of the principles and details" of the first Tariff law, he proclaimed his sanction of a system which it has been reserved for later times, to assail and discredit. The great measure of defensive policy thus sanctioned, was matured for the avowed purpose of "encouraging and protecting manufactures." And let this too be remembered, the Tariff which Washington approved, was mainly the work of a Pennsylvania Representative, an enlightened Philadelphia merchant.*

Washington asserted the constitutional powers of the Federal Government to regulate the currency, and give certain and fixed equivalents throughout the land to honest industry. He had seen and known the curse of an irredeemable government circulation. He had, throughout the war, and when the war was over, suffered under the Continental Paper Money. He believed the States, themselves, animated by local rivalry and sectional jealously, would not and could not, permanently, regulate and adjust the nicest of all economical machinery, that which creates the currrency of an extensive nation; and after deliberation, which showed the depth of his solicitude; after manly consultation with his constitutional advisers, he signed the first National Bank Bill, and gave to the people that steady security which, while it existed, never had an equal in the financial history of the world.

Nor were these the only great measures of Washington's policy. In the mind of his Financial Minister, a mind which, it has been beautifully said, was "as radiant with intelligence as

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* Thomas Fitzsimmons, a Representative from the city of Philadelphia on the 9th of April 1789, moved to add to the enumerated articles of import subject to specific duties, giving as his reason, "the necessity of encouraging the productions of the country, and protecting our infant manufactures."

the firmament with stars," was conceived the great project of restoring the National credit by an assumption of the debts of the States. There it was elaborated and matured, and when submitted to the people, it too had the sanction of Washington's authority. The war of the Revolution had left the States involved in hopeless bankruptcy, overwhelmed with debts incurred for the common welfare, and stripped by the Constitution of the only easy mode of raising revenue. That word of infamy, the last coinage of insolent iniquity, *repudiation*, had no existence then—but the willingness to pay an honest debt was mocked by actual destitution. The tax gatherer could glean nothing from fields wasted by long and bloody war. The thoughts of Washington and his advisers were turned to the freshly written words of the Constitution, and there they found no denial of a power in the General Government to interpose its means of beneficence and make the debts of the States its own. There are those who can recollect, history tells to us who are younger, what was the effect of this measure of relief. American credit, the combined credit of the Nation and the States was restored or created. Capital and wealth were called from the grave where they were buried, and a thrill of invigorating gratitude and joy animated the hearts of thousands who, through public bankruptcy, looked forward to the doom of certain, desperate poverty.

But, my friends and fellow-countrymen, fellow-citizens of Pennsylvania, misunderstand me not. Our dishonor—that which makes us blush before the world—that which makes us silent under the sharpest sarcasm, the public bankruptcy of this day, can fairly look to no such relief. The duty of self-reliance has not yet been performed. This is not the day which succeeds that of actual war. Ours is not hopeless, but it is wilful

bankruptcy, and we have no right to call for aid till we have done our duty. To ask for relief now, before we make the resolute effort of honest men to extricate the Commonwealth from its present calamity, and while plenty and prosperity in rich abundance are all around us, will be to make a confession from which the pride of Pennsylvania, in its honorable instincts, revolts. I, for one, am not prepared yet to do it. I am too proud of the soil that gave me being, whose history in her day of real calamity, in the dark hours of the Revolution, and amid the horrors of civil war, every Pennsylvanian has studied with honest pride, to despair of the Republic, its integrity and faith. But should the hour of despair arrive—should the pervisity of public councils or of the popular mind force upon us the conviction that nothing will be done for ourselves, by ourselves—should the pestilent dogma which distinguishes public from private morality prevail, and the mournful truth force itself on the mind, that nothing will be done at home, then, but not till then, let us remember that there is a paternal, beneficent government to which we can look in our hour of desperate shame, and that Washington himself has sanctioned its interposition to save us from the deep disgrace of being a *nation* of sharpers.

Fellow-citizens, I have no sensibility, no true-hearted man can have, to threats of foreign aggression or forcible retaliation, even for admitted wrong. It is not the sneer of ribald eloquence from abroad which wounds my heart. The time has been when bright shafts from the same rich quiver have been shot across the Atlantic, and fallen harmless, at our feet; but then we were clothed in the bright armour of invulnerable virtue and integrity, and defied the point which national antipathy turned against us. Now, alas! it is the sense of doing wrong which

enfeebles our arm, and leaves us exposed to wounds from hands which once we scorned. There is not a breeze that comes across the ocean which is not freighted with the cries of widows and of orphans, complaining of the wrongs we have done to them, and there is an echo here at home, from sufferers amongst ourselves, which swells the bitter chorus of complaint, which is sounding throughout the world at our neglect to do a simple duty.

It was but yesterday—pardon me, my friends, for dwelling on thoughts of self-reproach—that on the floor of Congress, its venerable patriarch, the illustrious man whose birth was coeval with the birth of this nation, and who now survives the last bright link which binds the age of the Revolution to our own, spoke of Pennsylvania with melancholy eloquence, as of that ancient Commonwealth, whose proud motto *once* was, "*Virtue*, Liberty and Independence." And no one Representative of Pennsylvania could venture to say, that the rebuke and lamentation were unjust.

Oh! my friends and fellow-citizens, you, who think as I do; who mourn as every honest man must mourn over the degradation we endure, I call on you, (and I wish my feeble voice could reach to every corner of this great Commonwealth,) on this sacred day, on this anniversary of the birth of one who never broke faith with man;* whose highest attributes were those of justice, to unite in all and every effort, on all occasions, with and without party organization, to remove the load of shame and obloquy which now weighs us to the earth. The

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* In 1774, Washington refused to sanction a non-exportation agreement, because it prevented the colonies from paying their just debts abroad. In his honest judgment, no oppression could justify dishonor.

inheritance of our fathers, the pride of ancestry, the associations of history, the memory of Washington and those immortal names which brightened the firmament when we dared look upward, are worthless now, and will be worthless as subjects of pride and exultation, till public faith be restored and the public word of honour be redeemed.

I have spoken of that venerable man who yet survives in the full vigour of his gigantic mind, and whose presence amongst us on this day we hoped to have.

Had he come, how proud a welcome, on such an anniversary, would the Whigs of Philadelphia have given him. We would have honored him for his own sake; we would have honored him for his father's sake. Here to Philadelphia we should have gladly bade him welcome, here where the trumpet-tongue of eloquence proclaimed Independence before the pledge of mutual fidelity was written which bound all to common danger. It was John Adams, who, here in Philadelphia, walking in the State House Yard, first named Washington as the Commander-in-Chief of the Army of the Revolution. It was John Adams who made John Marshall, Chief Justice of the United States. It was John Quincy Adams, of whom, exactly half a century ago, Washington said, "He must not think of retiring from public life. His prospects are too fair, and I shall be much mistaken if, in the course of time, he be not at the head of our Diplomatic corps, let the Government be administered by whomsoever the people may choose.* It was John Quincy Adams whom Washington thus honored, who when he occupied the place which Washington once held, disregarding the clamour of foul and malignant calumny, and trusting to the slow but certain jus-

* See also XI Washington's Writings, 188.

tice which time would render, made Henry Clay his Secretary of State.

And that slow but certain justice—that compensation which even in this world virtue commands, has been made. There is a generous impulse to the heart of the people which cannot always be abused, and by one of those coincidences which seem too picturesque to be accidental, we have seen, almost at the same moment, the Congress of the Union solacing the last hours of an old soldier by an act too amiable to be cavilled at, and the Legislature of a sovereign State, and that state, the state of General Jackson's extremest popularity, voluntarily acknowledging an ancient error, retracting an unjust accusation, and doing frank and generous justice to those illustrious men, whom, of all living men, this Nation now has greatest reason to be proud of.*

And now, Fellow-citizens, I feel your patience must be nearly exhausted. And yet I feel how little justice I have done to you, to myself, to the great theme which the associations of the day afford.

I meant to tell you what the example and administration of Washington were.

I meant to shadow forth what, in the certain and early future, those who worship at the shrine of Washington have a right to look for.

One word sums it all. His was a GENEROUS ADMINISTRATION. Its attribute was beneficence. The Constitution, by his interpretation, was a great engine of great good. It fostered and

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* The Act of Congress refunding General Jackson's fine, and the Resolutions of the Legislature of Tennessee, rescinding the censure which, nearly twenty years ago, was passed in relation to Mr. Clay's appointment by Mr. Adams, as Secretary of State.

protected all parts of the Nation, secured equal rights and guarded every interest. The Judiciary, the Navy, the Currency, the Tariff, the Public Credit, all prostrate when he assumed his great public trust were established in definite form and influence before he relinquished it. And down to this hour the Institutions of the country bear the impress of his mighty mind, so deeply marked that time and error, abuse of public office and transient perversity of the popular mind cannot obliterate it.

Nearly half a century has passed since, here in Philadelphia, on the floor of Congress, John Marshall announced the death of Washington. His words, dictated by all the warmth of deep reverence and affection, are yet in our memories.

"Let us pay the last tribute of respect to our departed friend. Let the grand council of the Nation display the sentiments the Nation feels. However public confidence may change, and public affections fluctuate as to others, with respect to him, in war and in peace, in public and private life, they have been as steady as his own firm mind, and constant as his own exalted virtues."

And his memory cherished yet in the Nation's heart, has its protecting influence, its influence for good, for encouragement and consolation; consolation for the immediate past and present—encouragement to wait for the coming of the bright day which is dawning on an abused and disappointed people. The principles of generous statesmanship, the benign interpretation of the Constitution, the influence of patriotic example, the force of personal character, chastened and invigorated through a long career of public service—these, realized in our candidate, are the anticipations which brighten our day of hope and confident reliance. Of the cold and cheerless contrast, this is not the time

to speak. This is not the occasion, when thoughts of such a contrast can find utterance. Gratitude and hope are beating in our hearts. The words of cheerful praise of the living, and veneration for the illustrious dead, alone are on our lips. And when the fulness of that day does come—when the hopes of the Nation are realized—when He, towards whom the heart of the people yearns, and to whom our best, truest, most resolute devotion is now pledged, shall assume the position to which a grateful people call him, let him look steadily to the example of the first and greatest President as his best and surest guide, and when history shall write its final record, let the truth be there inscribed, that Henry Clay made Washington's administration the model of his own, and that the principles of Washington are the principles of the Whigs.

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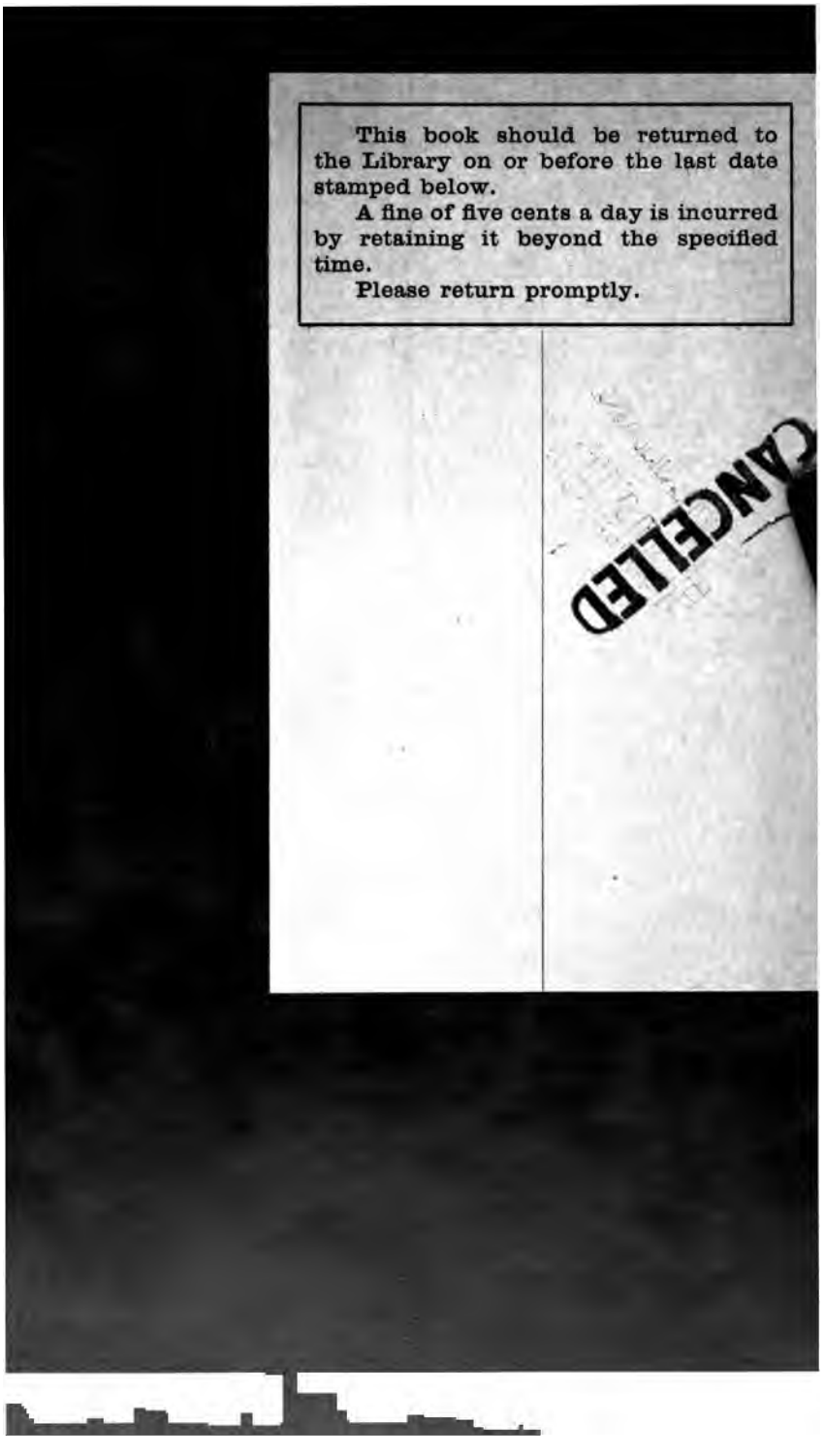

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